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Student-Centered Learning

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Abstract

Although there is much controversy about student-centered learning, it has proven to be successful in raising the achievement levels of students in reading, math and science. Higher achievement levels are reached by engaging students with technology and group projects that encourage them to surpass their comfort zone and accomplish the task they have chosen to pursue.

Student Centered Learning

Student-centered learning, often referred to as Project-Based Learning (PBL), is a 21st-century concept implementing a new curriculum using technology and the student's own abilities to achieve higher standards than the traditional learning styles (Zmuda, 2009). Stephanie Bell (2010) states it best, "PBL is not a supplementary activity to support learning. It is the basis of the curriculum".

The concept of student-centered learning is to bring the classroom and students to life. The teacher is considered a "guide on the side", assisting and guiding students to meet the goals that have been made by the students and the teacher. Students of all academic levels from AP to learning disabled, work together in small groups as a team. This type of grouping brings out the strengths of each student: challenging them in a non-threatening environment to meet higher levels of critical thinking. Also, grouping students of all academic levels, mixing the males and females, the athletes, the popular, and the socially awkward, breaks down the social structure of "cliques" often found within schools. This learning structure leads to higher self-esteem, better communication skills, and in unifying students in the diverse, multicultural society they live in.

To attain a successful curriculum means that the teacher also has to make changes in how they teach their students. A traditional one-size-fits all approach will not work in an environment in which students are part of the decision making (Zmuda, 2009). To be successful as a teacher it is imperative to build a relationship with a student; respect fosters respect, which breaks down the barriers that inhibit communication and trust (Moye, 2010). Johnny Moye (2010) states that "the trick is to have students learn while they are busy having fun", making learning and teaching more comfortable. This also builds trust, allowing students to feel they can discuss what they are feeling or what problems they may have, enabling the teacher to guide them into finding ways to fulfill their goals. To build a foundation with students Johnny Moye (2010) suggests that the teacher become more involved with student activities and the community where they live. Attending sport functions, participating in clubs and finding common interests are all strategies that can be used to build a relationship with the students. It is very important to assess and evaluate not only the student, but the teacher also needs to self-evaluate, reflecting on their own performance and correcting mistakes they may make. A truly passionate teacher loves what they do and will put their students first, treating their "students like *they* are alive" (Moye, 2010).

In the article *Leap of Faith* by Allison Zmuda (2009), she speaks of her work with school leaders from around the country. She states that in reviewing education literature and standard documents they can be distilled down to the following handful of educational priorities:

Most prominent 21st-century skills

- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Collaboration
- Effective communication
- Global literacy

More subtle, but equally compelling capacities

- Creativity
- Inventiveness
- Resiliency
- Empathy

These skills and capacities require students to actively construct meaning, and to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant information (Zmuda, 2009, 16).

When using this method of teaching it is important to keep in mind that students may become frustrated at times because there may not be a clear cut answer to a solution when they are working at higher levels of critical thinking. It is equally important to remember to keep a connection between school work and the world the student lives in or it will seem unimportant to the student, being ineffectual and disconnected from the "real world" (Zmuda, 2009).

It is no surprise with the advancements in technology and global networking that students spend more of their out of school time in the virtual world of the internet and gaming. They build their own social groups, networking in areas of interest and researching on their own. This may not always be the correct factual information, but it is nonetheless, forming the opinions and knowledge they retrieve for themselves. This shows how important it is to embrace the technology, welcoming it into the classroom, to guide and coach the students in learning the correct way of using on-line technology: teaching them the reliable and safe procedures of networking and researching. Allison Zmuda (2009) points out that the goal of learning needs to be clearly established, but the pathway to learning should be more fluid.

In researching student-centered learning it was difficult to find studies that have been implemented for over eight weeks to determine if the changes in student learning had effectively changed; showing how this approach needs to be the curriculum instead of a supplement as stated by Stephanie Bell. She points out that in "a student-driven, teach-facilitated approach" (Bell, 2010, 39) students learn from asking questions that pique the interest and natural curiosity. The ultimate outcome is a higher understanding of a topic, higher level reading, and more motivation to learn (Bell, 2010). In a British study done over three years in the subject of math compared students taught at a traditional school and at a PBL school. The students at the PBL school had three times as many students achieve the highest possible grade on the national exam: it also showed that the students were superior in answering applied and conceptual problems (Boaler 1999: as cited in Bell, 2010). Bell also includes statistics of schools in Dubuque, Iowa for three years improving the IOWA Test of Basic Skills from "below average" to "district or above average". In reading there was a particular increase from 15% in one school to 90% in two other schools while district average stayed the same (Thomas, 2000: Bell 2010). Thomas (2000) also points out that in Boston, at an inner city, racially diverse school, 8th graders showed marked improvement as well as in Maine at a middle school after only one year of implementing PBL learning (as cited in Bell, 2010).

There is a process in learning how to be self-reliant for a student. It begins with using organizers to isolate a question, and figure out how the will identify and find their answers in research. Then they must select a way to display what they learned in a form of a project, which requires cooperation of their peers in the group to make it a success (Bell, 2010). When working with

their peers, there is more pressure to pursue higher levels of thinking and learning to compete and do the best they can in their group. This leads to learning accountability, cooperation, being conscientious of completing their part and it has shown improvement in attendance to school so they do not fall behind. Scaffolding is a major part in PBL, it assists in making the cognitive growth a challenge for the student, pushing them in organized and aided techniques to go beyond their comfort zone (Bell, 2010).

Keeping a classroom real is also important in student-centered learning. When a situation arises that makes the student or the teacher feel awkward or that there has been loss of control, it can be devastating to moving forward in learning. There is usually loss of trust and willingness to communicate amongst each other. Christopher Uhl (2010) addresses this in *Steering into the Curve*. He states that it "is the power to transform classrooms from tedious, lifeless places to alive, authentic relationship-rich environments" (Uhl, 2010). In learning to name what is in the room, keeps it real: for instance, if there is an awkwardness about something, ignoring it does not make it go away, so talk about the "elephant in the room" to let everyone know they are not the only one who feels that way. Letting both the student and the teacher speak what is true or how they perceive it, without judgment. This is one of the most important strategies in building a relationship between peers, and in coordinating work within a group. It is also important to know that keeping it real is allowing for changes if a topic does not get completed by a scheduled time; possibly because of extra help that may be needed or discussion of higher level thinking may occur. Working with this process will also help teachers and students to learn not to take it so personal when it may feel like there is failure. Using the lesson to learn more about themselves and how they learn (Uhl, 2010). Learning this responsibility in a school environment transforms the school from dull and fearful to interesting and safe, giving students and teachers the chance to explore and achieve.

Special needs students also have shown to display growth in academic learning and social skills; as well as being accepted from their peers that would not normally work with special needs children. Special need students often have aptitude of strength in hands-on or constructive styles of learning which can be capitalized in group learning for devising projects (Bell, 2010). This also brings the real world into schools because most students follow careers that enhance their skills and strengths.

Students with special needs have been noted to excel in group structures and by pairing them with students of higher performance has engaged them to work harder. Research suggests that pupils who need help benefit because of being able to turn to peers for assistance. Often students can easily understand and focus on what is needed to provide them with explanations faster than what a teacher can. This may be due to the fact that they are more aware of what is going on in the group at that time or with what is happening outside of a classroom socially (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010).

Diamanto Filippatou and Stavroula Kaldi (2010) have stated that there was an increase in willingness to work in groups for children with special needs or disabilities as well as an increase in what they retained about the topic. To get to this level it has proven that a student has to have basic skills mastered or the ability to reach the academic level of learning for that topic, letting the student to be able to keep up with their peers. This can be accomplished by having assistance provided to the student at the time while the pupil is working in the group. This eliminates the issues of falling behind or not being understood by the peers, teaching them how to work together to accomplish the task at hand (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010). Diamanto Filippatou and Stavroula Kaldi (2010) "concluded that students with learning difficulties can benefit through PBL in academic performance, motivation, cooperative learning, and social acceptance" (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010, 25).

Student-Centered learning has proven to take students to higher levels of critical thinking, problems solving, improvement of attitude to learn, as well as an increase in overall attendance. The use of the curriculum is essential for students to achieve success in the global world that ensues the advancements of technology. We as educators need to use this technology to engage our students to

make school more interesting and fun, pushing our students to their full potential with alternative methods.

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